King Memorial Drive In Memphis Collapses

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A Memphis-based $2.5-million fund drive to establish a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial at the Lorraine Motel has collapsed, but its organizer said the project will continue to solicit contributions nationwide from new headquarters in Chicago.

"We have dismissed the heads of the Memphis fund," Charles Buford, who announced plans in March to buy the hotel, said in a telephone interview from Chicago. "There is no longer a Memphis chapter and there won't be until we find dedicated folk that are sincere about doing something for the Lorraine Motel."

Meanwhile, Walter Bailey, owner of the hotel where King was assassinated, said he had been paid only about $2,000 toward a $150,000 down payment on it. He also said he was holding a $2,000 check from a New Orleans fund-drive chapter because "it's no good — I know it's no good.

"There have been promises made and made and made, and they haven't lived up to them," Bailey said.

A Detroit fashion designer, Prince Watkins, one of the organizers involved in the Memphis fund drive, has raised questions about Buford's handling of the fund. Watkins said Buford has run up an unpaid account with a Detroit consulting firm, Professional Skills Alliance, which handled an unsuccessful fund drive in Detroit earlier this year.

An official with the firm, Mrs. Vera Myers, said last week she was aware of and concerned about the charges against Buford. Asked if there were unpaid bills connected with the Detroit fund drive charged to Buford, she replied, "Yes, there are."

"We have not been working on the fund since April," said Mrs. Myers, indicating she was reluctant to discuss details. She said she was making tentative plans to fly to Memphis to check out the accusations.

Buford, who said he was fired from his job at Criterion Advertising in Chicago after reporters from The Commercial Appeal called there Friday to inquire about the fund, denied he had misused any of the money. He did concede that some of the fund's expenses had not been paid.

"No money has been taken; it hasn't been raised," Buford said. "In Detroit, they went in the hole on the fund-raising effort there. Folks are just not responding like they should."

Buford said the fund drive was severing its ties with Memphis because "the Memphis people have shown they aren't concerned about building a shrine to Martin Luther King. The folk that marched with Dr. King, the folk he died for, they aren't concerned."

Buford said most of the fund's problems have stemmed from poor organization by local fund drive organizers. He said he was establishing national executive offices in Chicago so that all finances will be handled through a central organization.

He said he was still confident the money could be raised to buy the hotel.